

Six steps to a healthier you

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(HealthDay)—As one year ends and another begins, people often assess their habits and lifestyle, and consider changes that could improve their health.

But what, exactly, should you do?

Here are six steps you can take to enhance your well-being, according to doctors from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA):

1. Keep a personal health calendar.

"In our busy lives, we hardly pay attention to our [health](#), and most health issues start with subtle symptoms that we fail to follow," Dr. Aparna Sridhar said in a UCLA news release. She's an assistant professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the university's David Geffen School of Medicine.

"In fact, most patients with illness cannot pinpoint when symptoms started and if there was any association with life events," Sridhar said. "By maintaining a health calendar and jotting down symptoms, medications and mood changes, patients will be able to identify abnormalities sooner and seek care."

2. Eat more fruits and vegetables.

"A number of chronic diseases, including obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and stroke, have an identified association with diet," UCLA dietitian Dana Hunnes said in the news release. She's senior dietitian at the Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center.

"If each of us shifts to a more plant-based diet—filled with vegetables, whole grains, legumes, nuts, seeds, fruits and other produce—we can not only potentially lower our risk for these diseases, but we can also be healthier and potentially live longer," Hunnes said. She noted that diets low in animal protein are also linked with greater longevity.

3. Cook at home rather than eat out.

"People who cook at home eat a healthier, more nutritionally dense diet," said Erin Morse, chief clinical dietitian at UCLA Health. "With obesity escalating and contributing to other serious health issues—like diabetes, heart disease and high blood pressure—cooking at home is a vastly underutilized tool patients can use to achieve their nutrition goals."

Morse noted that the food served at restaurants usually has less fiber and a lot more salt, sugar, fat and processed carbohydrates than home-cooked meals.

4. Support healthy gut bacteria.

"For better health overall, you not only need to feed your own human cells, but you also need to feed all the microbes that live on you and inside you—including the gut microbiome," Dr. Zhaoping Li, director of the UCLA Center for Human Nutrition, said in the news release.

"The best foods for these microbes are plant-based foods and drinks," she said.

5. Don't underestimate the benefits of healthy lifestyle changes.

"Certain lifestyle choices are far more integral to your health than any doctor's visit," said Dr. John Mafi. He's an assistant professor of medicine at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA.

"To promote general well-being, mom's advice isn't far off: Eat mostly fresh vegetables, fruits and whole grains; get at least seven or eight hours of sleep per night; reduce your work stress; make time to exercise and

get outdoors; and spend quality time with close friends and family," Mafi said.

"The research behind each of these activities clearly demonstrates their benefits to your health," he added.

6. Don't neglect your sinus passages.

"Patients with allergies and sinus problems should be rinsing their sinuses regularly with saline, a surprisingly effective method for controlling symptoms that accomplishes several things," said Dr. Marilene Wang. She's a professor of head and neck surgery at the David Geffen School of Medicine.

Rinsing clears particles and other irritants—like pollen and smog—from the nose and sinus passages, Wang said. This can help ease troubling symptoms, including congestion and swelling.

Rinsing the sinuses also thins the mucus and moisturizes the inside of the nose. Nasal membranes "can be very inflamed and sensitive from allergies and infections," she said.

Most drug stores sell sinus rinse kits without a prescription.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provides weekly [tips](#) to help you protect your health.

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